

Quick Facts

About... Norovirus (Viral Gastroenteritis)

What is viral gastroenteritis?

Viral gastroenteritis (VYE-rull gas-tro-en-ter-EYE-tis) is a highly contagious illness involving inflammation of the stomach and intestines. Viral gastroenteritis can be caused by several different viruses that cause similar diseases and infect humans only, e.g., norovirus, sapovirus, adenovirus, and astrovirus. The infection can produce severe gastrointestinal symptoms, but most persons recover quickly and without seeking medical attention. Viral gastroenteritis is more common in the late fall through the winter, but infections and outbreaks can occur year round.

"Stomach flu" and "food poisoning" are common but misleading terms for viral gastroenteritis. Viral gastroenteritis is not the same illness as influenza ("the flu"), which is a respiratory illness caused by different viruses which produce symptoms such as fever, aches, sneezing, and coughing, not diarrhea or vomiting. Unlike actual food poisoning, viral gastroenteritis does not originate directly from food; rather, the food has been contaminated from an infected individual.

How is viral gastroenteritis spread?

Viral gastroenteritis is passed in stool and vomit, and people become infected by ingesting stool (fecal-oral route) or vomit from an infected person. The virus is easily spread by contaminated food or beverages, from person to person, and by contact with a contaminated object. These viruses can remain infectious on surfaces for up to 72 hours, and only a very small amount of virus is needed to cause infection.

There are many ways to become infected with viral gastroenteritis:

- Exposure to contaminated food or water, such as:
 - Consuming food or drink prepared by an infected person.
 - Consuming raw shellfish (e.g., oysters).
- Hand-to-mouth exposure to the stool or vomit of an infected person, such as:
 - Handling or cleaning up stool or vomit.
 - Touching a contaminated surface or object.
 - Having close contact with an ill household member.
 - Having sexual contact that involves contact with stool.
 - Inhaling contaminated air droplets from explosive diarrhea or vomiting.

High-risk settings include those involving large groups of people, food, or poor hand hygiene, e.g., daycare centers, schools, hospitals, long-term care facilities, and cruise ships. Persons who work in certain occupations, such as food handlers, daycare providers, and health care providers, have a greater risk of transmitting infection to others.

What are the symptoms of viral gastroenteritis?

- Watery diarrhea
- Vomiting
- Nausea
- Cramps
- Headache
- Muscle aches
- Tiredness

Symptoms usually begin 24-48 hours (range of 12-72 hours) after exposure and last 24-48 hours. The illness can last 72-84 hours in the elderly or in those with weakened immune systems. Most cases have no, or slight, fever.

Viral gastroenteritis can be a serious illness for people who are unable to drink enough fluids to replace what they lose through diarrhea and vomiting. Infants, young children, the elderly, people who are unable to care for themselves, and people with weakened immune systems are at increased risk for dehydration. Death is extremely uncommon, but the illness can compound other health problems.

How do I know if I have viral gastroenteritis?

A person having diarrhea lasting more than 24 hours should consult a health care provider. The illness is usually diagnosed by symptoms, duration of illness, and medical exam. Your health care provider may order tests to rule out bacterial infection or another condition.

How is viral gastroenteritis treated?

There is no medicine to cure the infection. A health care provider may recommend medicine to lessen the symptoms or fluids to prevent dehydration.

Is viral gastroenteritis a reportable disease?

No. Viral gastroenteritis is not a reportable disease.

How can viral gastroenteritis be prevented?

In general, viral gastroenteritis can be prevented by strictly adhering to the following guidelines:

- Practice good hygiene:
 - Thoroughly wash hands with soap and water after using the restroom; after changing diapers; after assisting someone with diarrhea and/or vomiting; after swimming; and before, during, and after food preparation (please refer to Quick Facts about Hand Washing).
 - Clean food preparation work surfaces, equipment, and utensils with soap and water before, during, and after food preparation.
- Eat safe foods and drink safe water (Remember: Contaminated foods may look and smell normal):
 - Wash all produce before eating raw or cooking.
 - Use treated water for washing, cooking, and drinking.
- Protect others:
 - Persons with diarrhea and/or vomiting should not prepare food or provide health care for others and should limit direct contact with others as much as possible.
 - Persons with diarrhea and/or vomiting should not attend a child-care facility or school.
 - Persons with diarrhea and/or vomiting shall be excluded from employment involving food handling (Indiana Retail Food Establishment Sanitation Requirements, 410 IAC 7-24-122).
 - Do not change diapers near recreational water.
 - Do not go swimming or use hot tubs if you have diarrhea and for at least two weeks after diarrhea stops.

Where can I learn more about viral gastroenteritis?

To search Indiana data and statistics:

www.in.gov/isdh/dataandstats/disease/diseases_index.htm

To search the Indiana Food Protection Program:

<http://www.in.gov/isdh/regsvcs/foodprot/index.htm>

To search disease information:

http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/submenus/sub_norwalk.htm

<http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~mow/chap34.html>

<http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~mow/chap35.html>

To search for national data, statistics, and outbreaks:

www.cdc.gov/mmwr/

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